# The Role of Media in Fragile Situations:
# A research dialogue across disciplines

Report of research symposium
Stanmer House, Brighton UK
16 January 2009

In January 2009, a small group of senior governance researchers, political scientists, anthropologists, participatory development and media researchers met, together with donor and media practitioner organisations. Their aim was to take a reality check of the state of development research relevant to the role of media in 'fragile states', and to map out the basis of a more robust research agenda. This is the report of this one day meeting.

Learn more about the event at:
www.ids.ac.uk/go/about-ids/news-and-analysis/january-2009-news/media-and-fragile-states

## About the Institute of Development Studies

The Institute of Development Studies (IDS) is a leading global organisation for research, teaching and communications on international development. Our vision is a world in which poverty does not exist, social justice prevails and the voices of all people are heard in national and international institutions.

In all of our work, IDS aims to challenge convention and to generate fresh ideas that foster new approaches to development policy and practice.

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Established in 1999, the BBC's international development charity uses creative media to reduce poverty and promote human rights, enabling people to build better lives for themselves.

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Hosted by BBC World Service Trust and Institute of Development Studies

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# Why a research dialogue on media and fragile situations?

**The BBC World Service Trust [1] and the Institute of Development Studies organised this meeting for three main reasons:**

### 1. An issue of increasing policy interest:

Evidence has been growing in recent years about the significant role of media in determining governance and development outcomes in states often described as fragile, or thought to be experiencing fragility. The role of media in the 2007/8 Kenya crisis in particular has raised policy questions and concerns.[2] Research that can inform policy choices in this area appears thin. Attention by influential policy informers [3] on the issue appears to be growing. DFID's new research strategy (2008 – 2013) argues that 'Our research will identify the long-term factors and responses that help to stabilise and rebuild fragile states. It will research... the role of the media and other civil society organisations'. The issue becomes particularly significant when we consider that pockets of vulnerability in stable states and sites of stability in fragile governments can have real transnational impact on security and development agendas.

### 2. Media's role is highlighted, but rarely interrogated in fragile states research:

The role of media has been highlighted (among many other issues) in much current governance related literature, including in Drivers of Change studies, research on democracy, neopatrimonialism and other issues. While the issue is mentioned, clear policy conclusions of just how significant, or insignificant, the role of media is relevant to these debates and whether such research points to a growing or diminishing role, are not easy to draw.

### 3. A disconnect between development and media research:

The role of media in governance and development outcomes has not, apparently, commanded significant interest from development research institutes. The media research community has not, apparently, framed their research agendas in ways that resonate with mainstream research agendas on fragile states. Policy relevant research on the relationship between media and democratic and development outcomes in fragile states seems extremely limited.

*"Policy relevant research seems extremely limited"*

# Why a dialogue across the disciplines?

This research symposium was designed to bring together a diverse range of research disciplines to:

• Reflect and gain insights from participants on the current state of research on media and fragile states;
• Explore what a more serious and robust research agenda would look like on the issue, and specifically what kinds of research questions most needed answering;
• Identify what the opportunities, advantages and disadvantages of cross disciplinary research might be.

The media's role in fragile states, as elsewhere, cuts across many areas of development policy. Even when the debate about media and democracy is confined to relatively restricted parameters (focused for example on issues of state stability, media's role in underpinning or undermining political settlements, it's role in fuelling or calming conflict), the issue cuts across issues of political science, media research, development economics, anthropology, governance, citizenship and participatory development among others. Some of these research communities have weak interdisciplinary traditions, particularly in relation to research relevant to media.

## A focus for the discussion

The symposium was designed to examine the relationship between media and what was described as the 'fabric of democracy'. It did not seek to examine the role of media as a conduit for communicating research, as an advocacy tool for development action, as a way of gaining institutional profile for particular organisations or as a way of communicating particular development messages to particular groups.

All these essentially instrumentalist roles of the media were considered important components for development action, but fell outside the main focus of this research dialogue.

# Media and fragile situations: mapping the initial challenges

The overall conclusion from this opening session was that this was an under-researched area with distinct research challenges. Policy formulation and priority setting was difficult in relation to media because research provided little foundation to reach clear policy conclusions. The issue appeared to be growing in relevance to governance and democracy agendas, but clear guidance for policy actors on how to respond, and how much priority to attach to the issue, was scant.

The session asked participants to raise their general reflections on the issue. A series of research gaps or needs, as well as challenges, rapidly emerged from the meeting (some of these points are also drawn from later discussion).

These can be divided into three broad categories:

• Knowledge gaps

• A lack of data

• Research and other challenges

*"There is little or no serious analysis of the role of media in underpinning or undermining state stability"*

## Knowledge gaps

- **Not enough is known about media and local accountability systems:**
  It was acknowledged that development agencies have not been good at understanding or supporting local accountability systems, including within fragile states.

- **We don't know the broader impact of governance programmes:**
  There are contested notions about what research is telling us about the impact of governance and democracy support programmes as a whole over the last decade. If questions such as 'Is democracy appropriate in the form that it has been promoted in some fragile states?' remain unanswered, how can more specific questions about the role of media in that process be addressed?

- **Undermining or underpinning state stability?**
  A core governance issue for fragile states is state stability. There is much literature about this issue [4] but little or no serious analysis of the role of media in underpinning or undermining state stability. Serious policy debates over whether governments are legitimate in limiting media pluralism and factionalism in the interests of state stability on the one hand or whether increasingly free, decentralised and participatory media systems provide an important, necessary pillar of strategies to develop state citizen relationships and underpin state effectiveness on the other, are rare and poorly structured.

- **What does the increasing interactivity of media mean for state-citizen relationships?**
  Media provides important mechanisms for civic engagement and was considered to be a determining factor in the quality of state citizen relationships. The increasing interactivity of media, enabled especially by the rapid spread of mobile telephony and the linked increase in phone-ins and other interactive debate programmes, as well as the internet, is creating new opportunities for citizen participation. How important are these?

- **What is the impact of increasingly fragmented media in increasingly fragile states?**
  Information and communication trends point towards more complex, crowded communication environments driven by technology, by liberalisation and the demand from citizens for more information and greater debate. Trends are likely to continue and intensify (to an extent regardless of policy responses). Research on the impact of these changes on state fragility is very limited. So is guidance on what media and other support strategies constitute useful and appropriate policy responses.

- **Media capture and its political effects:**
  The potential of co-option and capture by media, whether by governments, opposition, religious entities – or even by civil society and NGOs – is a growing issue as media systems liberalise and diversify. Research on the democratic and political effects, or indeed the extent of such trends, was considered sparse.

- **Media freedom is under increasing attack in many states:**
  What do we know about the impacts of such erosion on state accountability and what is the role of development organisations in supporting and defending media freedom?

*"What is the role of development organisations in supporting and defending media freedom?"*

## A lack of data

- **Research findings and commentaries on the role of the media are too rarely rooted in data:**
  There are rapid and potentially important shifts and trends, particularly regarding the increased interactivity that communication trends are enabling, trends are generally identified through speculation and anecdote rather than robust data.

- **The role of media during election processes warrant special attention but critical research literature is not there:**
  Media's political effects are often most acute around elections, and these effects can be stark, including violence and the derailing of democratic processes. However, there is little critical research or guidance that can inform policy choices around this role. Media monitoring, one of the few areas that is clearly integrated into election support strategies, are inconsistent and there are few reviews of lessons learned from their implementation. Suggestions were made for comparative research on the role of media in different election outcomes where media was a clear factor (e.g. between Kenya and Ghana).

- **Media behaves differently during elections:**
  Equally, research that is restricted to the election process risks misunderstanding the broader, long term and historical learnings of the role of media in nation and state building, and its overarching role in democratic, political and economic change.

*"Suggestions were made for comparative research on the role of media in different election outcomes where media was a clear factor"*

## Research and other challenges

- **Is there a danger in imposing an external agenda?**
  There are dangers that, just as the good governance agenda has been heavily influenced by external actors (including through NGO advocacy), any increased focus on the role of media in governance may be subject to similar endogenous forces. There is a concern that this may undermine internally generated reform and change.

- **Neoliberal and democracy promotion agendas:**
  Promotion of media freedom and media development is associated by some researchers with a dogmatic, neoliberal approach to democracy promotion. This has acted as a disincentive to interest in the issue.

- **Are there normative assumptions underpinning media and democracy discourse?**
  Too often, discussions on media and democracy make generalised positive assumptions about its contribution to democracy. Experiences in Rwanda and, more recently, Kenya, challenge such assumptions and demand an analysis of its destructive and oppressive potential. Similarly, as media become

increasingly participatory, decentralised and horizontal, analysis of the many positive democratic dividends that result may need to be complemented by a more balanced analysis that incorporates some of the negative.

- **State building and citizen building:**
  The fragile states discourse can quickly become limited to one focused on building the legitimacy and capability of the state. The challenge is also building the capability of the citizen. The role of the media in shaping the quality of state citizen relationships is potentially substantial.

- **There are special demand disincentives for research on the role of media in citizenship and accountability:**
  There are special disincentives at work when it comes to demand for research into the role of media in holding governments to account. Those in power have little incentive to see greater policy focus on this area, arguably even less than other citizen empowerment or state accountability areas (such as civil society). Lack of government demand can shape development priorities.

- **Media is not homogenous** and any research agenda has to be rooted in an understanding that there is immense variation and complexity within as well as between different media sectors (state, commercial, community etc.)

- **Parameters and definitions are a challenge:**
  There are problems in restricting a debate to one focused on fragile states (and, it was noted, fragility can be a variable factor within states, not just between them), and there are challenges in reaching agreed definitions of media (generally assumed in this discussion to encompass radio, print, television as well as communication technologies such as mobile telephony and internet.)

  > Are we clear by what we mean by a free media? Is the fact that it is free sufficient in democratic and governance terms (much media is elite based and driven and sometimes unresponsive and irrelevant to the needs of non-elites)?

  > The pace of change in the media and communication sector is as rapid, perhaps more rapid, than any other: media is exploding and flourishing in some countries, and is in economic or political crisis in others, with changes happening often very rapidly; new technologies, and particularly mobile telephony, are rapidly transforming information and communication opportunities, including for the poorest with poorly understood consequences. This presents special research challenges.

*"Discussions on media and democracy may need to be complemented by more balanced analysis"*

# Some research questions on media and fragile situations

An initial set of questions were posed in a presentation from the BBC World Service Trust, which also outlined its international research and research network. It divided research issues into three broad areas, based on the Trust's existing understanding and drawing on its own research:

•   Areas where research currently exists

•   Areas where some research exists but clear policy conclusions are difficult to determine

•   Some areas where research appears to be important but is lacking

An important objective of the symposium was to identify some clear research questions that would be of interest not only to media researchers and practitioners, but to economists, political scientists and governance researchers and other policy informers.

*"Under what conditions, and to what extent, do liberalised media systems contribute to state fragility?"*

## Areas where research currently exists:

- **Media mapping** (numbers and documentation of media actors), media landscape studies, media sustainability analyses and access to technologies (such as mobile telephony).

- **Public opinion**, perceptions and trust levels of different institutions (including media), particularly in countries where media relevant projects take place.

- **The impact** on audiences and populations of particular media interventions.

## Areas where some research exists but clear policy conclusions are difficult to determine:

- Research on media and political landscapes that reveals issues of **media independence** (not only from government but also other political, commercial, religious or potentially extreme groups), issues of media capture, the plurality and **ownership of media systems**.

- **Elections** and under what conditions media underpin informed, inclusive, peaceful elections, or undermine them?

- The interaction between evolving media and communication systems and the political settlement in specific countries where organisations like the BBC World Service Trust have done research.

## Some areas where research appears to be important but is lacking:

- **Neopatrimonialism:**
  Much analysis in the governance and democracy fields exists detailing how, in many fragile and emerging democracies, power continues to be exercised through client patron relationships and other systems of patronage, and where power continues to reside with individual political figures in a position to command and determine the distribution of economic and political resources. The role of media has been highlighted [5] as an issue capable of disrupting such systems.

  - It is unclear how substantial a factor a free and independent media can play and whether media is a constructive disrupter of such systems (capable of contributing to greater state transparency and accountability without increasing state fragility) or a destructive disrupter of these systems (where, for example, especially in poor, fragile semi-democracies, unsophisticated media liberalisation can lead to media capture).[6]

    Nor is there research rooted policy guidance that provides insight under what conditions media plays these roles.

- **The sequencing debate:**
  Within the context of whether democratic reform should, or should not, be sequenced [7] (should follow rather than underpin the state building project), under what conditions, and to what extent, do liberalised media systems (and associated communication changes resulting from democratic and economic reform) contribute to state fragility.[8]

  - Or, alternatively, do media provide a critical component of any economic and democratic development strategy in (for example) bottom billion countries.[9]

- **Accountability:**
  What do we know of the impact of changing media systems on accountability under different political cultures,[10] particularly in fragile states? Has, for example, the upsurge of talk shows and discussion programmes following broadcast liberalisation (e.g. in countries such as Uganda and other countries with plural media systems) led to real or simply cosmetic changes inpolitical accountability?

- **Drivers of change:**
  Drivers of change studies [11] have quite frequently highlighted the role of media as a driver. What do we know of whether media and communication shifts are substantial, significant or merely minor factors as a driver of change?

- **Conflict:**
  Whether media functions in occasionally fostering conflict are a product of regulatory, economic, political or other failure, or an absence of engagement and support.

- **Is Amartya Sen still right?**
  Sen has famously argued that no democratic society with a free media has experienced a famine.[12] But given the rapid rate of change within the media and communication sectors, and their very different incentive structures, what do we know of the 21st century incentives and disincentives to a free media investigating famine related issues? Do free media systems in fragile semi-democracies provide information feedback in the same way as that in countries such as India?

## The discussion that followed suggested:

- The research evidence that could provide answers to these questions was not readily available.

- Some of these questions raised special research challenges given the continuing lack of conclusive conclusions emanating from political science literature. Drawing clear policy conclusions from the role of media liberalisation within the context of a debate around democratic sequencing was difficult given continuing disagreement around the generic issue of sequencing.

# Media, participation and citizenship

One key theme emerging through the seminar focused on the relationship between media, communication and state fragility; another was the relationship between media, communication and citizenship, especially within the context of violence.

**Key presentations from the Institute of Development Studies highlighted the role of citizenship in building effective states.**

Violence and instability contributes not only to the fragility of the state, but to the fragility of citizenship. If it is citizens who build functioning democratic states, rather than the other way round, democracies resting on citizens have clear capabilities and depend on the existence of certain conditions under which citizenship can be exercised.

The role of information and communication (and of media within those roles) in this context is one of a number of different factors, but research is scant about how important it is. Issues of freedom of information and access to information stand out, and there is a significant research literature on the contribution of participatory communication to strengthening citizenship and the accountability – and ultimately legitimacy – of the state.

One set of research questions concerning media and communication is located within larger debates on the impact of violence on citizenship (especially how violence fractures notions of identity), and of the role of media and communication in enabling citizens to exercise their rights and, ultimately, develop and redevelop identities.

Another set, more centrally focused on the role of media, is on the public debate role of the media. The role of media, particularly around elections, potentially supports a public dialogue (including a national public dialogue) that can transcend traditional identity politics (where votes are cast according to ethnic, religious or other traditional loyalties), to enable electoral decision making that is focused on policy issues. If there is emerging evidence of media contributing to this shift in electoral decision-making, under what conditions does a media develop that is capable of enabling such national public dialogue in fragile states?

New Web 2.0 technologies are taking on increasingly relevant roles, including providing real-time insight into events during crisis and violence (an example provided was the online mapping through mobile telephony and web technology of violence and human rights abuses during the Kenya violence in 2007.)[13]

*"Violence and instability contributes not only to the fragility of the state, but to the fragility of citizenship"*

# The state of media research

**Rooted in presentations from Professor Robin Mansell, from the Department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics, a discussion highlighted a series of opportunities and challenges relevant to the fragile states agenda:**

- The importance of media research being better rooted in the issues and disciplines it can contribute to (in other words, rather than starting with media, start with issues of governance, accountability etc. and then determine the role of the media).

- Political science does not take media research seriously, but too rarely carries out its own serious research in the area. There are two issues here. The first is that political and economic research disciplines rarely consider media a serious subject of interest; the second is that media research is too rarely considered a substantive source of analysis relevant to political and economic research.

- There is a real need and significant opportunity for more interdisciplinary research on the impact and implications of democracy and stability in fragile states of the role of media and communication.

- There remain top down, linear models in media theory at a time when media and communication patterns are increasingly horizontal, complex, interactive and participatory. Models need both to reflect reality, and need to be capable of being constructed in ways that facilitate interdisciplinary research.

- There are critical areas where media affect governance, politics and governance outcomes that are under-researched or not researched.

*"Political science does not take media research seriously, but too rarely carries out its own serious research in the area"*

# How we can move forward on this agenda

The final session was designed to merge the day's insights into a framework for advancing the agenda. The participants were split into three groups, all dealing with the same set of questions. Below are the questions and respective responses.

## 1. What are the opportunities for cross-disciplinary media research in the context of effective states and active citizenship?

The groups generally dealt with this question as one of methodology and research design. There was consensus that the media should be used to reflect issues that lie outside of it. Theoretical concepts and discourses, such as governance and citizenship, can be studied using media to pose questions about their real world manifestations. Media can thus situate theory by referring to distinct and observable relations e.g. media and human rights.

• It was proposed that a useful relational prism through which to do this analysis would be one of 'sources of influence.' The idea being that 'influence' makes actors apparent while also revealing the power dynamics between them.

• It was stressed that principles of good social science research should govern this project. Most crucially, it should start with the formulation of questions (with as much practical relevance as possible), rather than quasi-theorising. Interdisciplinarity can also be fostered through joint PhD programmes across disciplines.

## 2. What would be the two-three priority areas for such research?

• The day's discussions tended to centre around Africa and the future of its development. It thus followed that one of the priority areas that cut across the groups related to neo-patrimonialism. The key governance concern on the continent relates to systems of patronage and how they affect the distribution of public goods.

• Related to this is the issue of accountability – how to identify the actors and the relations that dictate how people understand the concept and then proceed to act on it.

• The role of media in post-war states was also identified as key. This issue broadly relates to the media and research weakness in following up on developments after big historical moments such as elections or wars.

- There was a concern that part of the knowledge gap derives from the inability to understand how specific historical moments lead to the consolidation of power over the long term. Not only are these processes poorly understood, but so too is the role of the media as an active, political agent in shaping them. Issues of mediation between individuals and institutions, both horizontal and vertical should be interrogated.

- As a practical starting point, it was suggested that media studies should form a more integral part of political science and development research. It is also important to research new media and the 'new applications of media'.

### 3. What constraints need to be overcome to advance these agendas?

- Funding, where it is derived from and how priority areas are budgeted for, was identified as a challenge to initiating research in this field.

- There was the concern that critical evaluation of models may be overlooked in a bid to apply grand prisms of analysis to the identified issues.

- In trying to deal with big concepts and processes, research runs the risk of holism, the inability to deal with the components that make up the broader project being addressed. It was stressed that to overcome these problems, media studies needs to be embedded within disciplines that ordinarily address concerns about fragile states, citizenship and governance.

- It is also important to recognise that media is often strongly associated with democratisation and the neoliberal agenda.

# Conclusions and next steps

**The following overall conclusions could be made from this one day discourse:**

### The research agenda

- There is a potentially substantial and increasingly relevant research agenda on media and communication which could provide important policy insights into state fragility, state effectiveness and state citizen relationships.

- Research on this agenda is starting from a low level, both in terms of content and capacity.

- Several priority areas for research were identified. This included looking at state transitions and patrimonial reflections on society, and issues of state-citizen relationships.

### Locating the research

- Interdisciplinary research will be important, as will research which connects core development research disciplines with media practice and media research.

- As a beginning, there is an urgent need for more media studies research to be framed within research agendas that resonate with political science and 'mainstream' development research.

- Equally, political analysis and political science, governance, economics and other disciplines could usefully reassess whether these and other research questions should constitute a more serious component of their own research agendas and how media studies could usefully contribute to their understanding.

- Practitioner organisations are important sources of current research insight and policy analysis and are an important part of the research mix.

### Challenges going forward

- Media and communication trends are especially rapid, and policy-useful research will need to be similarly rapid and reflect current reality.

- More needed to be done to determine more precisely a core set of research questions. More also remained to be done in identifying the most effective constellation of research actors, relationships and methodologies that would deliver timely and research rooted policy guidance on these issues.

- A more predictable and organised resource base to support such efforts was also necessary for real progress to be made.

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# Endnotes

[1] The Policy and Research Programme on the Role of Media in Development is a five year programme financed by the Department for International Development (DFID) at the BBC World Service Trust. The seminar was co-organised by this programme collaboratively with the Research and Learning Group at the BBC World Service Trust.

[2] See, for example, *The Kenya Elections and Their Aftermath: The Role of Media and Communication*, BBC World Service Trust 2007. (**http://downloads.bbc.co.uk /worldservice/trust/pdf/kenya _policy_briefing_08.pdf**).

[3] See for example, Professor Paul Collier's presentations to the Salzburg Seminar (**www.salzburgseminar.org/ 2009/news.cfm?IDMedia= 44722 and click on mp3**) and the Global Forum for Media Development (**www.gfmd -athensconference.com /en/node/112**).

[4] The book by Ashraf Ghani, former Finance Minister of Afghanistan and Clare Lockhart was highlighted here (*Fixing Failed States: A Framework for Rebuilding a Fractured World*, 2008, Oxford University Press).

[5] Reference was made here to, for example, Diana Cammack, 'The Logic of African Neopatrimonialism: What Role for Donors?', *Development Policy Review*, 2007, 25 (5): 599–644.

[6] Reference was made here to, for example, *Why Templates for Media Development do not work in Crisis States*, James Putzel and Joost van der Zwan (2005), London School of Economics and, more broadly, to the work of Mushtaq Khan, 'Markets, States and Democracy: Patron-Client Networks and the Case for Democracy in Developing Countries', *Democratization*, 12.5: 704–724.

[7] See for example, Thomas Carothers, *The Sequencing Fallacy*, Journal of Development 18.1 (2007) 12–27. **http://muse.jhu.edu/journals /journal_of_democracy/ v018/18.1carothers.html**

[8] See for example some arguments made in *Why Templates for Media Development do not Work in Crisis States* Putzel, James and van der Zwan, Joost (2006) London School of Economics/Annenberg School of Communication. **http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/837/**

[9] See for example, Professor Paul Collier's remarks at Salzburg Seminar on *Strengthening Independent Media* (2008). **http://www.salzburgseminar. org/2009/news.cfm? IDMedia=44722**

[10] See for example Timothy Besley, Robin Burgess and Andrea Prat, 'Mass Media and Political Accountability' (2002), chapter for *The Right to Tell: Institutions and the Media*, Ed. Roumeen Islam, World Bank.

[11] Reference made, for example, to *Lessons Learned on the Use of Power and Drivers of Change Analyses in Development Cooperation* OECD DAC Govnet, (2005).

[12] Amartya Sen, 'Democracy as a Universal Value', *Journal of Democracy*, 10.3 (1999): 3–17.

[13] **www.ids.ac.uk/go/about- ids/news-and-commentary/ august-2008-news/wiki- workshop-at-ourmedia-7**

# Participants and acknowledgements

## Participants

**Gordon Adam**
Media Support

**Geoff Barnard**
IDS Knowledge Services

**Charlie Beckett**
Polis, London School
of Economics

**Nick Benequista**
Citizenship & Accountability
Development Research
Consortium

**Evangelia Berdou**
IDS Knowledge Services

**David Booth**
Overseas Development
Institute

**Guy Collender**
London International
Development Centre

**James Dean**
BBC World Service Trust
(BBCWST)

**Dominik Helling**
London School of Economics

**David Leonard**
IDS Governance Team

**Susan Loughhead**
Head, Effective States Team,
Department for International
Development

**Richard Manning**
Chair of IDS Board of
Trustees and former
Chair of the OECD's
Development Assistance
Committee

**Robin Mansell**
Head, Media Programme,
London School of Economics

**Nick Perkins**
Institute of Development
Studies (IDS)

**Gerry Power**
BBC World Service Trust
(BBCWST)

**Anna Schmidt**
IDS Governance Team

**Nicole Stremlau**
Stanhope Centre for
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IDS Institute of
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